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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/19/2016

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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS: STILL STRUGGLING WITH SREBRENICA

Classified By: CDA Chat Blakeman, reasons 1...

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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS: STILL STRUGGLING WITH SREBRENICA

Classified By: CDA Chat Blakeman, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Dutch Defense Minister Henk Kamp presented a special insignia on December 4 to troops who served in Dutch Battalion (Dutchbat) III under the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia in 1995. While the insignia is intended to honor Dutch servicemen who functioned honorably and conscientiously in difficult circumstances, it has provoked questions and criticism by a Dutch society still struggling with their failure to prevent the massacre of Muslims by Serbian forces at Srebrenica. End summary.

Special Insignia for Srebrenica Service  
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12. (U) On December 4, Dutch DM Kamp presented Dutchbat III members an insignia as a symbol of recognition for their service in Srebrenica over ten years ago. Dutchbat troops under UNPROFOR were responsible in July 1995 for defending the Bosniak enclave designated by the UN a special enclave. In Europe's worst civilian massacre since World War II, Dutch troops stood helplessly as Serbian forces rounded up and massacred over 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica. Approximately 500 of the 850 Dutchbat servicemen attended the ceremony to receive the insignia from Kamp.

13. (U) Dutchbat's failure to prevent the massacre has been an on-going controversy for the Dutch. Critics blame Dutchbat cowards for doing nothing to prevent the massacre, while Dutchbat troops claim defense of Srebrenica was impossible due to an insufficient mandate, inadequate arms, and lack of UN support. Dutch troops returned home to charges of incompetence; many sought long-term trauma treatment. The massacre ultimately led to the collapse of the Dutch government in April 2002 following a critical report released by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation. The report cleared Dutch troops of most blame, noting they were outnumbered and lightly armed -- and under restricted rules of engagement -- but assigned partial blame to the Dutch Government for setting the troops up to fail.

14. (U) In response, the Dutch Government must now meet a select criteria -- the toetsingskader -- before Parliament will agree to support a deployment overseas. The most important requirement involves teaming with a greater power to avoid any perceived abandonment, as the Dutch believe happened to them at Srebrenica. In the effort to meet this criteria, recent Dutch consideration over their deployment to Afghanistan stalled several times until agreement was reached to team with Australian forces in Uruzgan province.

15. (U) Kamp stated during the insignia ceremony that Dutchbat troops functioned honorably and conscientiously in difficult circumstances, and were wrongfully presented in a negative light for a long period of time. He noted that Dutch forces have long been blamed for the failure to protect Srebrenica, but thorough inquiries have made clear that the Dutch should not be held accountable for the massacre. Kamp acknowledged that as a result of Srebrenica, Dutch troops have been viewed as cowardly or weak. He explained that the Dutch Government wants to show recognition to the Dutchbatters not only for the work they did in good faith, but also for the years of vilification.

#### Criticism for Special Recognition

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16. (U) The presentation of insignias has resurrected bitter feelings over Srebrenica. In addition to demonstrations in Sarajevo and The Hague, and criticism voiced by the Mothers of Srebrenica Association, Dutch newspapers and human rights organizations have blasted the insignia presentation. Critics in the Dutch left-of-center newspaper Volkskrant noted that the insignia is a slap in the victims' faces and proves once again that the role of the Dutch military is more important than the victims' feelings.

17. (U) Commentary in the Dutch newspaper Algemeen Dagblad noted that the insignia is no medal for valor or distinction. Right-of-center Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad commented that the insignia may soothe the heavy conscience of the Dutch military, but questions of individual responsibility, leadership capabilities, and the judgment of local commanders on the ground will continue to gnaw on the individual conscience.

18. (U) Tilman Zulch, chairman of the human rights organization Society for Threatened Peoples (GFBV), argued that the Dutch Government should not reward the military for failure, and that the Dutchbatters should have resisted Serbian forces. Left-of-center Dutch newspaper Trouw questioned whether the Dutch should be happy with this gesture -- the answer to this can only be answered by the real victims of Srebrenica. Trouw also found it striking that Kamp offered no words of defense in response to Srebrenica, an omission that renders the insignia distinction uncomfortable.

#### Why Now?

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19. (C) Some critics have suggested the insignia is designed to highlight a strong, united Dutch military while detracting from allegations of Dutch weakness in Afghanistan. In a

conversation with Polmiloff on December 18, MFA Deputy Director for Conflict Prevention, Peace Operations and Civil Cooperation Joop Nijssen dismissed these charges, describing the insignia as unfinished business from the last Balkenende Government. Nijssen said the GONL wanted to present the insignia earlier, but feared it might become politicized during the recent Dutch parliamentary election campaign. Given the Liberal Party's (VVD) poor showing in the elections, Nijssen explained, VVD will not be asked to join any new coalition, and Kamp will step down as defense minister. As such, Kamp opted to present the insignia prior to his departure from office; any linkage with allegations of Dutch weakness in Afghanistan is spurious at best, Nijssen said.

¶10. (C) MFA Director of the Western Balkans Division Cees Rolz separately rejected any direct linkage with Afghanistan. He noted the insignia is intended to boost the morale of Dutch veterans, who are held in relatively low regard by Dutch society. Rolz suggested the only linkage the insignia might have with Afghanistan would be to show Dutch troops deployed there that Dutch society does care about its veterans.

Comment  
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¶11. (C) Srebrenica dramatically influenced Dutch military deployments overseas, including especially requirements to team with other countries and maintain clear rules of engagement -- these factors were considered heavily in the Netherlands' decision to deploy to Afghanistan. Srebrenica also contributed to an inferiority complex that Dutch military leadership has long sought to overcome. During his tenure, Kamp repeatedly called for the Dutch military to move past their failure at Srebrenica; his first trip as defense minister was to Bosnia in an effort to bury the ghosts of the past.

¶12. (C) While GONL officials reject any linkage to Afghanistan, critics are quick to note the insignia presentation followed closely on charges by Canadian military officers that the Dutch lacked guts regarding the perceived need to hunt and kill Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, while publicly Kamp has called for the Netherlands to move on, DAO contacts acknowledged that the Dutch military privately offered Dutchbatters a chance for redemption by serving in Afghanistan -- a strange offer, given Kamp's statements that Dutchbat has suffered too long. It is clear that as the Dutch military struggles to overcome the past and honor its veterans, emotions within Dutch society are still raw ten years after its military's failure at Srebrenica.

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